



By Winter's Light (Cynster Novels)

By Stephanie Laurens

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#1 New York Times bestselling author Stephanie Laurens ushers in a new generation of Cynsters with an enchanting tale of mistletoe, magic and love

It's frosty December in Scotland and six Cynster families come together at snowbound Casphairn Manor to celebrate the season—and where Cynsters gather, love is never far behind.

The festive occasion brings together Daniel Crosbie, tutor to Lucifer Cynster's sons, and Claire Meadows, widow and governess to Gabriel Cynster's daughter. Daniel and Claire have met before and the embers of an unexpected passion smolder between them.

However, Claire, once bitten, twice shy, believes a second marriage is not in her stars. Yet Daniel is determined. Assisted by a bevy of Cynsters—innate matchmakers every one—Daniel strives to persuade Claire that trusting him with her hand and her heart is her right path to happiness.

Claire is increasingly drawn to Daniel despite her misgivings. Then catastrophe strikes, and by winter's light, she learns that love—true love—is worth any risk, any price.

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Editorial Review

Review

"When it comes to dishing up lusciously sensual, relentlessly readable historical romances, Laurens is unrivalled."

-Booklist

"Laurens's writing shines."

-Publishers Weekly

One of the most talented authors on the scene today... Laurens has a real talent for writing sensuous and compelling love scenes."

-Romance Reviews

"Stephanie Laurens never fails to entertain and charm her readers with vibrant plots, snappy dialogue, and unforgettable characters."

-Historical Romance Reviews

"Stephanie Laurens plays into readers' fantasies like a master and claims their hearts time and again."

-RT Book Reviews

About the Author

New York Times bestselling author Stephanie Laurens originally began writing as an escape from the dry world of professional science. Her hobby quickly became a career; she has been writing historical romance novels for more than 20 years. Currently living outside Melbourne, Australia with her husband and two cats, she spends most of her days writing new stories in her signature 'Errol Flynn meets Jane Austen' style. Visit her online at www.stephanielaurens.com.

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December 23, 1837

Casphairn Manor, the Vale of Casphairn, Scotland

Daniel Crosbie felt as if all his Christmases had come at once. Letting his gaze travel the Great Hall of Casphairn Manor, filled to overflowing with six Cynster families and various associated household members, he allowed himself a moment to savor both his unexpected good fortune and his consequent hope.

About him, the combined households were enjoying the hearty dinner provided to welcome them to the celebration planned for the next ten days—as Daniel understood it, a combination of Christmas, the more ancient Yuletide, and Hogmanay. Seated about the long refectory-like tables on benches rather than chairs, with eyes alight and smiles on their faces, the assembled throng was in ebullient mood. Conversation and laughter abounded; delight and expectation shone in most faces, illuminated by the warm glow of the candlelight cast from massive circular chandeliers depending from thick chains from the highdomed ceiling. The central room about which the manor was built, the Great Hall lived up to its name; the space within its thick walls of pale gray stone was large enough to accommodate the Cynster contingent, all told about sixty

strong, as well as the families of the various retainers who worked in and around the manor, which functioned like a small village.

With no family of his own still alive, Daniel had spent his last ten Christmases with the Cynster family for whom he acted as tutor—the family of Mr. Alasdair Cynster and his wife, Phyllida—but this was the first time in that decade that the Cynsters had come north for Christmas. The six Cynster families present—the six families closest to the dukedom of St. Ives, those of Devil, Duke of St. Ives, his brother Richard, and his cousins Vane, Harry, Rupert, and Alasdair—invariably came together at Christmastime. They were often joined by other connected families not present on this occasion; the long journey to the Vale, in the western Lowlands of Scotland, to the home of Richard Cynster and his wife Catriona in a season that had turned icy and cold with snow on the ground much earlier than expected had discouraged all but the most determined.

Out of long-established habit, Daniel glanced at his charges—soon to be erstwhile charges—seated at the next table with their cousins and second cousins. Aidan, now sixteen years old, and Evan, fifteen, had passed out of Daniel's immediate care when they'd gone up to Eton, yet Daniel still kept an eye on the pair when they were home—an action their parents appreciated and which the boys, at ease with him after all the years, bore with good grace. At that moment, both were talking animatedly with their male cousins in a fashion that instantly, at least in Daniel's mind, raised the question of what the group was planning. He made a mental note to inquire later. Jason, the youngest son of the family and the last of Daniel's true charges, was similarly occupied with the group of Cynster offspring nearer his age. Now eleven, later in the coming year, Jason, too, would start his formal schooling—a circumstance which had, for Daniel, raised the uncomfortable question of what he would do then.

Once Jason left for Eton and there were no more boys in Alasdair Cynster's household in Colyton, in Devon, for Daniel to tutor, what would he do for a living?

The question had plagued him for several months, not least because if he was ever to have a chance at the sort of life he now knew he wanted, and, if at all possible, was determined to claim, he needed to have secure employment—a place, a position, with a steady salary or stipend.

He'd been wracking his brains, trying to think of his options, of what might be possible, when Mr. Cynster—Alasdair—had called him into the library and laid before him a proposal that, in a nutshell, was the answer to all his prayers.

On several occasions over the years, Daniel had assisted Alasdair with his interests in ancient and antique jewelry, with documenting finds and establishing provenances, and also with cataloguing and adding to the collection of rare books Alasdair had inherited from the previous owner of the manor. Alasdair, supported by Phyllida, had suggested that, once Jason had departed with his brothers for Eton, if Daniel was happy to remain in Colyton as a member of their household, they would be delighted to engage him as Alasdair's personal secretary, an amanuensis to assist with Alasdair's ever-expanding interests.

The suggested stipend was generous, the conditions all Daniel could have hoped for. Not only would the new position suit him, it would solve all his difficulties.

Most importantly, it cleared the way for him to offer for Claire Meadows's hand.

He glanced along the board to his right. Clad in a soft woolen gown in a muted shade of blue, Claire—Mrs. Meadows—was sitting on the opposite side of the table, two places down. She was the governess in Rupert Cynster's household; as Rupert and Alasdair were brothers, Claire and Daniel were often thrown together

when the families gathered. It was customary in such circumstances that the attending tutors and governesses banded together, sharing responsibilities and each other's company, as they were at present. The manor's governess, Miss Melinda Spotswood, a comfortable matronly sort with a backbone of forged iron, was chatting to Claire. On Melinda's other side, opposite Daniel, sat Oswald Raven, tutor at the manor; a few years older than Daniel, Raven projected a debonair façade, but he was hardworking and devoted to his charges. Raven was chatting to Mr. Samuel Morris, who was seated alongside Daniel and hailed from Vane Cynster's household in Kent; the oldest of the group, Morris was slightly rotund and had an unfailingly genial air, yet he was a sound scholar and very capable of exerting a firm hand on his charges' reins.

All five had met and shared duties on several occasions before; the rapport between them was comfortable and relaxed. Over the coming days, they would, between them, keep an eye on the combined flock of Cynster children—the younger ones, at least. The oldest group, the seventeen-year-olds led by eighteen-year-old Sebastian Cynster, Marquess of Earith and future head of the house, could be relied on to take care of themselves, along with the large group of sixteen-and fifteen-year-old males. But there were six boys thirteen years and under, and seven girls ranging from eight to fourteen years old, and over them the tutors and governesses would need to exert control sufficient to ensure they remained suitably occupied.

There was no telling what the engaging devils would get up to if left unsupervised.

Being governess or tutor to Cynster children was never dull or boring.

Daniel had managed to keep his gaze from Claire for all of ten minutes. Despite the color and vibrancy, the noise and distraction—despite the many handsome and outright stunningly beautiful faces around about—hers was the shining star in his firmament; regardless of where they were, regardless of competing sights and sounds, she effortlessly drew his gaze and transfixed his attention.

She'd done so from the moment he'd first seen her at one of the family's Summer Celebrations in Cambridgeshire several years ago. They'd subsequently met on and off at various family functions, at weddings in London, at major family birthdays, and at seasonal celebrations like the current one.

With each exposure, his attraction to Claire, his focus on her, had only grown more definite, more acute, until the obvious conclusion had stared him in the face, impossible to resist, much less deny.

Utterly impossible to ignore.

"If the weather holds," Raven said, commanding Daniel's attention with his gaze, "and the older crew go riding as they're planning, then we'll need to invent some suitable pastimes to keep our charges amused."

Seated with his back to the table at which the Cynster children were gathered, Raven had turned and asked what the animated talk had been about. Riding out to assess the position and state of the deer herds had been the answer.

Daniel nodded. "If at all possible, let's get those left to our care out of doors."

"Indeed," Melinda said, turning from Claire to join the conversation. "We need to take advantage of any clear days. If it is fine enough tomorrow, I was saying to Claire that the fourteen-year-olds—the girls—might like to gather greenery to decorate the hall." Melinda gestured to the stone walls hosting various fireplaces and archways, all presently devoid of any seasonal touches. "It's customary to decorate them on the twenty-fourth, which is tomorrow."

"I'd heard," Morris said, "that there's some tradition about the Yule log that's followed hereabouts." He looked to Raven for confirmation.

Raven, his hair as dark as his name would suggest, nodded. "Yes, that's an inspired idea. Not only is it necessary to collect the right-sized logs, but the logs have to be carved. That should keep the boys amused for hours. I'll speak to the staff about organizing whatever's needed."

Daniel nodded again, and his gaze drifted once more to Claire; she'd been following the conversation, her calm expression indicating her agreement with the suggestions. With her glossy mid-brown hair burnished by the candlelight, with her delicate features and milky-white skin, her lips of pale rose, lush and full, and her large hazel eyes set under finely arched brown brows, she was, to his eyes, the epitome of womanhood.

That she was a widow—had been widowed at a young age—was neither here nor there, yet the experience had, it seemed, imbued her with a certain gravitas, leaving her more reserved, more cautious, and with a more sober and serious demeanor than might be expected of a well-bred lady of twenty-seven summers.

Her station—gentry-born but fallen on hard times—was similar to, or perhaps a touch higher than, Daniel's; he didn't really know. Nor did he truly care. They were both as they were here and now, and what happened next...that was up to them.

He'd come to Scotland, to the Vale, determined to put his luck to the test—to seize the opportunity to speak with Claire and plead his case, to learn if she shared his hopes and if she could come to share his dreams.

A gust of laughter and conversation drew his gaze to the high table.

The six Cynster couples were seated about the table on the raised dais along one side of the room, a traditional positioning most likely dating from medieval times. In addition to those twelve—middle-aged, perhaps, yet still vibrantly handsome, articulate, active, and engaged—there were three of the older generation at one end of the board. Helena, Dowager Duchess of St. Ives, mother of Devil and Richard and elder matriarch of the clan, was seated at the end of the table closest to the hearth, and had chosen to summon Algaria, Catriona's aging mentor, and McArdle, the ancient butler of the manor, now retired, to join her there. The three were much of an age and, judging by their glances and gestures, were busy sharing pithy observations on all others in the hall. Having met the dowager and been the object of her scrutiny on several occasions, Daniel didn't like to think of how much she, let alone black-eyed Algaria, was seeing.

A comment in a deep voice, followed by laughter, drew Daniel's gaze back to the twelve Cynsters of the generation that currently ruled. Their children might have been growing apace, might already have been showing signs of the forceful, powerful individuals they had the potential to become, yet the twelve seated about the high table still dominated their world.

Daniel had observed them—those six couples in particular—for the past ten years. All the males had been born to wealth, but what they'd made of it—the lives each had successfully wrought—hadn't been based solely on inherited advantage. Each of the six possessed a certain strength—a nuanced blend of power, ability, and insight—that Daniel appreciated, admired, and aspired to. It had taken him some time to realize from where that particular strength derived—namely, from the ladies. From their marriages. From the connection—the link that was so deep, so strong, so anchoring—that each of the six males shared with his wife.

Once he'd seen and understood, Daniel had wanted the same for himself.

His gaze shifted again to Claire. Once he'd met her, he'd known whom he wanted to share just such a link with.

Now he stood on the cusp of reaching for it—of chancing his hand and hoping he could persuade her to form such a connection with him.

Whatever gaining her assent required, he would do.

Now Fate in the form of Alasdair Cynster had cleared his path, it was time to screw his courage to the sticking point and act.

Hope, anticipation, and trepidation churned in his gut.

But he was there and so was she, and he was determined to move forward. He knew how he felt about her, and he thought she felt similarly toward him. His first step, plainly, was to determine whether he was correct in believing that—and whether with encouragement, "like" could grow into something more.

* * *

Claire was very—not to say excruciatingly—aware of Daniel Crosbie's gaze. Of his regard. Of the steady, focused way in which he looked at her.

She wished he wouldn't—or, at least, her mind told her that was what she should wish. Her emotions—stupid giddy things—were more inclined to be flattered and interested...as she'd said, stupid and giddy. And reckless, too.

Yes, Daniel was a handsome, personable, honest, and honorable man; she wasn't silly enough to imagine she was in any danger of receiving any indecent or illicit proposal from him.

Which was the point. With his dark brown hair, thick and straight, his lean face that so fitted his long, lean, athlete's body, and his gentle, intelligent, brownish-hazel eyes, he was too nice, too gentlemanly, too kind—she didn't want to hurt him by peremptorily depressing any pretensions he might harbor. That she greatly feared he was, indeed, intending to voice.

She liked him and valued the quiet friendship that had sprung up between them too much to want to see it damaged, as it would be, quite definitely, if she was forced to say him nay. If she was forced to dismiss the offer she had a dreadful premonition he was intending to make.

There was no future for her with him—or, more accurately, for him with her. For either of them together. But convincing a gentleman like him of that...

Just the thought made her head and chest hurt.

Avoiding him seemed her only real option, but they were fixed at the manor for the next ten days; she would need every bit of ingenuity and quick thinking she could command to successfully keep him at a distance for such a long time.

She didn't like her chances, but what else could she do?

Live through one day at a time. That had been her motto during the days immediately following her husband's death; it was all she could think of that might serve her now.

Turning to Melinda, she said, "Alathea asked me especially to keep an eye on Mrs. Phyllida's two girls—Lydia and Amarantha—given they're the youngest here. If I'm to take the older girls out to gather greenery, do you have anything planned for the younger lot, or should we combine the two groups?"

Melinda shook her head. "The four fourteen-year-olds are too close-knit a clique—and there's Louisa in the lead, too. No need to give her more troops to command."

All the tutors and governesses knew that Devil Cynster's daughter was a handful—too clever, too persuasive, and far too adept at getting her own way.

"I was going to suggest," Melinda continued, "that I take the three younger ones—Margaret, Lydia, and Amarantha—into the kitchen. Cook said she would be making mince pies, and they'll enjoy helping."

Claire nodded. "That they will. All right—I'll take the older four." Surrounding herself with four fourteen-year-old girls should at least keep her safe through the next day. "What sort of greenery is customarily used for the decorations here, where do we get it, and how much are we likely to need?"

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